From bean to bar in Ivory Coast, a country built on cocoa

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On the eve of Fairtrade Fortnight, we meet the female farmers fighting for trade justice who face an uncertain future

Asking about the importance of cocoa in Ivory Coast feels a little like making enquiries about the value of grapes in Burgundy. When I put the question to N'Zi Kanga Rémi, who has for the last 18 years beengovernor of the rural department of Adzopé, north-east of the sprawling port city of Abidjan, he leaned forward in his chair and fixed me with an amused stare.

His booming voice went up a decibel to fill the administrative offices on whose walls his own portrait alternated with that of his nation's president. "It doesn't make sense to ask an Ivorian what cocoa means to him!" he said. "It means everything! It's his first source of income! My education was funded by cocoa! Our houses are built with cocoa! The foundations of our roads, our schools, our hospitals is cocoa! Our government runs on cocoa! All our policy focuses on sustaining cocoa!"

The governor leaned back in his chair and looked for confirmation from the representatives of a local cocoa co-operative who sat with us around the table. He then set about itemising some of the many challenges to that sustainability – the problems of climate change and deforestation and disease, the ongoing crisis of child labour – and some of the ways they were being addressed.

All the solutions he described led back to one intractable problem, however: it has become next to impossible for the 6 million people dependent on cocoa in his country to survive on the money they receive for their crop. Ivory Coast supplies 30% of the cocoa beans for the world chocolate market but the average daily earnings for a farmer here is just a bit more than the price of a KitKat: 74p. "I'm not sure any more that international trade can bring people out of poverty here," the governor said. "Because though we grow the cocoa, the market happens elsewhere."

The meeting with the governor came during a few days I spent travelling between cocoa farms and villages in the company of Michael Gidney, the chief executive of Fairtrade UK, and Anne-Marie Yao (or "Mama Cocoa", as she is known to the farmers here), who is in charge of developing and certifying Fairtrade co-operatives in west Africa . As the governor spoke, I jotted down the links in the chain of value that he described. Only the first of those links occurs here: the hard labour that nurtures cocoa trees and removes the beans from their pods, then shells and dries them and sells them at a fixed price through traders into a global market. The far more lucrative links, those that create processed products and branded chocolate bars for our supermarket shelves, are practically all in Europe, cornered by half a dozen or so vast corporations, such as Mondēlez (which owns Cadbury), Nestlé or Mars.

Among the most important final destinations for Ivory Coast cocoa is the UK, where 700,000 tonnes of chocolate are consumed each year, or 11kg per person, or three bars a week. But the relationship between the UK chocolate consumers and the west African producers has undergone a profound shift. When cocoa prices were high in the 1970s, the beans accounted for nearly half of the value of a chocolate bar. Today, producers receive around 6% of the value of the final product. The rest goes to branded manufacturers, who take roughly a 44% share, and retailers who take 35%. The price wars at our supermarket checkouts do not impact each link of the supply chain equally. In 2018, the year after the price of cocoa paid to farmers in Ivory Coast fell by a third, the Swiss-based Barry Callebaut, the world's biggest supplier of chocolate and cocoa products, posted a 12% jump in profits to $288m.

When this crisis in value for small farmers first became clear, it led to the idea of a new relationship between the consumer in the UK and the cocoa producer, one which valued transparency of the supply chain. Green & Black's Maya Gold was the first product to be stamped with the Fairtrade logo, 25 years ago, in March 1994. There are now several hundred Fairtrade chocolate products on UK shelves (still only about 13% of the market – Green & Black's, now owned by Mondēlez, has withdrawn from Fairtrade to operate under its own certification system).

Because the squeeze in the value of the commodity makes the situation of cocoa farmers ever more precarious, Fairtrade Fortnight, the annual effort to raise awareness of trade justice issues, which begins on Monday, will focus once again on chocolate. The guaranteed minimum price for Fairtrade cocoa is rising 20% to $2,400 a tonne, to which is added a $240 premium available to use for investment in social and economic projects. There is, too, a particular focus on women. "She deserves a living income", runs the event's tagline.

You don't have to travel far from the governor's offices into the low hills and forest around Adzopé out east to the Ghanaian border to feel the full force of that demand. The cocoa villages are desperately poor. Some have no access to a water pump, few have sanitation or drainage. Electricity is still a limited and miraculous thing.

Old customs die hard in these villages. Before visiting the co-operative farms, it is routinely necessary to pay a visit to the village chief, a hereditary position, and take part in a ceremony involving sharing water with his representatives, while the main man sits impassive in a plastic garden chair.

The best of the co-operative farms I saw, by contrast, do all they can to embrace progress. They have large handpainted signs up which detail their commitments, including pledges to outlaw child labour and protect the threatened forest land. The farmers explain some of the challenges to these commitments. At night, "forestières" will come and illegally chop down hardwood trees at the edge of their farms, a practice that is rarely prosecuted by corrupt officials, who blame the farmers themselves. "If it is the producers who are cutting down trees, why do we remain so poor?" the farmers say, with follow-the-money logic. (There is enough money in one large hardwood tree to cover three years of money that cocoa farmers can earn from their crop.)

Surveys suggest that there are still more than 2 million children working in west Africa's cocoa fields, some using hazardous chemicals or working with machetes. Trafficking and slavery remain endemic. The Fairtrade co-operatives monitor and outlaw these practices but for most families there is still the necessity for children to help with appropriate tasks after school.

The research suggests that the most effective ways of changing that situation is through greater empowerment of women in what remain highly patriarchal communities. There are 18 steps in cocoa preparation and women do 15 of them, but few have legal title to land or much say in decision making.

Yao – Mama Cocoa – has been pioneering a scheme to combat that fact. One of the first graduates of her Women's School of Leadership is Awa Bamba, the director general of a co-op called Cayat, which involves more than 3,000 farmers in 38 villages. In her two years in charge, Bamba has overcome resistance from more traditional voices by almost doubling the yield of the co-op's farms through training, and – using the Fairtrade premium – led diversification into poultry and egg production (which also produces fertiliser for 100 farms).

She has directed investment to a Cayat radio station to disseminate messages about agronomy and health, and toward nursery schools that allow women the freedom to work. A micro-loan scheme has been created, women lending to women, which carries zero interest if used for school fees. When she first attended the training, Bamba was asked about her aspirations. She said: "I want to be young and married and in leadership."

In the course of a few days, I met many other women who have gone through the programme and assumed leadership positions. Talking to them is like watching Educating Rita on fast forward. Leocadi Voh, 53, who has raised seven children on one hectare of land, explained to me how she employed new techniques to create the record yield for her co-op and used micro-finance to send her eldest daughter to university to be a vet.

Rosine Bekoin, who has since her training adopted a kick-ass blond highlight to her hair, now runs the plant nursery at Cayat. She proudly gives me a tour of the rows of 30,000 young cocoa plants that will replace ageing trees. Her husband tells me he was initially unsure about the training, "but now Rosine shines bright".

One of the problems the co-operatives face is that the market will only take a proportion of their cocoa on Fairtrade terms. Prices remains volatile and, in between the two annual harvests, farmers find themselves desperate to feed their families. That "hungry month" desperation creates opportunity for "pisteurs", the traditional local agents who bypass the collective arrangements of the co-op and pay farmers in cash. In one village we met Vincent Jafferi, who insists he is an "exceptionally honest" pisteur. He works out of a little office, and took up the job because a disability prevents him from working the land.

Such men as Jafferi are sometimes portrayed as the villains of the value chain, giving farmers less than their crop is worth. In reality, obviously, they are small components in a system weighted against them as well as farmers. Jafferi takes a couple of kilos commission for each 30 kilos of beans he sells, and has no control of the next stages of the market in which international cocoa traders manipulate notorious volatility in demand and supply. In a good month, Jafferi makes £100.

As Gidney observes: "Farmers need sales but, to make sales work in a sustainable way, they need market intelligence, about trends in chocolate buying. When the world market price collapsed for cocoa, the farmers – and the pisteurs – were the last to know."

In that complex world, there are always new obstacles coming down the line. There has been much talk lately of a newly "global Britain". Those who peddle that idea seem to want to offer a nostalgic promise of re-establishing old trading relationships, cutting out EU regulation. Shackles are often mentioned. The truth is that countries such as Ivory Coast qualify for developing nation status that guarantees tariff-free access to European markets for their cocoa beans and, theoretically, cocoa products. Their principal problem is not tariffs but access to finance and investment that would allow them to process their commodity at scale, the parts of the chain fiercely guarded by the big multinational players.

How the uncertainty that might attend a no-deal Brexit would affect those trading relationships is currently anyone's guess. Cadbury is stockpiling ingredients; Ferrero Rocher has advised of a 20%

rise in cost base; there have been rumours that Mars bars could be rationed by Easter. The UK government has made some commitments to rolling over current trading arrangements with nations such as Ivory Coast, but with a month to go, the legislation has not been signed.

In Ivory Coast, I asked farmers if they had ever heard the word Brexit. They rolled it around their mouths for the first time. Tellingly, the only farmer who knew the concept was Abu Aboukami, president of the Camaye Co-operativein Abengourou, near the Ghanaian border. Aboukami was the most enterprising of the co-operative leaders we met. When the prices of cocoa crashed in 2016-17, he persuaded his co-op that it must use its premium to invest in making its own chocolate, to sell initially in Abidjan and, if successful, to an export market. The rudimentary pilot operation was up and running, employing 50 women. The chocolate was delicious. When Aboukami first heard about Brexit, and connected it with the mandatory 30% World Trade Organisation tariff on finished confectionery, his first thought was that it might "crush those dreams". "Our economic plan wouldn't work," he said. "How will we then be able to take care of our families?"

Such questions, 25 years ago, led to the understanding that one crucial way of improving producers' lives would be to give consumers the knowledge to use their buying choices to create pressure on multinationals to change their behaviours. There are now 600 Fairtrade towns in Britain and more than 1,000 Fairtrade schools. But the compact they represent is under threat.

It would be optimistic to imagine that Brexiters' vision of a "global Britain" has, at its heart, a desire to reset imbalances in the value chain of commodities like cocoa. In the first warning of that direction of political travel in 2016, Fairtrade, along with all other development NGOs, lost all its partnership funding – £16.5m over five years – from the Department for International Development (DfID). Boris Johnson's recent gloss on the idea of global Britain involved disbanding the poverty-reduction programmes of DfID entirely.

Small acts can be symbolic. For the past 20 years, as part of its Fairtrade Fortnight, the organisation has brought over co-operative farmers to tour schools, and TV studios and radio stations to provide a human face and voice to issues of trade justice. This time, the farmers chosen to travel were Bekoin and Voh, from the Women's School of Leadership programme. I spoke to them about the prospect of coming over, about the coats they would need and the welcome they could expect from people keen to hear their stories. Neither had ever been out of Ivory Coast before and they spoke with excitement and pride about being spokeswomen. Last week, however, despite every possible assurance from Fairtrade, and with letters of guarantee from Will Quince MP (co-chair of the all-party group for Fairtrade), the Home Office refused to grant either Bekoin or Voh visas to travel to share their stories. The reason given was that neither woman could demonstrate personal means of support and therefore there was risk of them "absconding".
Of all the barriers Ivory Coast farmers face, invisibility is the most damaging. It appears that "out of sight, out of mind" is becoming government policy.

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P.S.

The Guardian

https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/feb/24/ivory-coast-cocoa-farmers-fairtrade-fortnight-women-farmers-trade-justice